

Of the Stars

You can't reach the stars.

That's what my father says. The astronomy books measure in lightyears, distances so vast even the fastest thing in the universe takes a year to cross it. If I ran as fast as I could without stopping, I would never be able to run a full lightyear in my lifetime. The star closest to us besides our own sun is three lightyears away: Alpha Centauri. It is too far for me to run to, but I can't stop trying.

When the night is humid and warm, and I can't stand to hear the voices in my house spitting at each other, I run. I run and run through the damp grass, stirring up mosquitoes and fireflies in my wake. I sprint across the field under the sky full of stars too far away to ever touch and pretend one day I'll reach them.

You can't hold the stars.

I said astronomy books; as if I've read more than one. All my knowledge comes from a big encyclopedic book full of photographs and facts about all the things orbiting above my head, both seen and unseen. It was a gift on my ninth Christmas; the only gift I got that year. It was the best Christmas I have ever had, with this wonderful book all shiny and new. It had crisp, glossy pages holding the universe. But now the binding is coming undone. And its once pristine pages are torn and bent, just as marred as my scraped knees from tripping in the field behind my house.

The book answered many of my questions. I've memorized just about every fact and phenomena in it. I know the moon is as wide as the continental United States, coast to coast. I know stars are not made of gas, but plasma; atoms vibrating so fast, they slam against each other and fuse to create new elements. And I know that I exist on a small planet in a small solar system at the edge of a small galaxy. A galaxy full of nebulas, black holes, stars, and all sorts of strange anomalies far more interesting than anything I'll find on Earth.

I like to think of the insignificance of my planet in the face of so much otherness when I feel the walls shudder from slamming doors and the muffled sounds of crying in the room down the hall. As the cycle of shouting and slamming and crying go on, I bury into the blankets I have arranged in the corner of my closet. While one hand holds a flashlight, the other traces the images of nebulas wondering what space dust would feel like.

But I know this is impossible to find out. Nebulas are cradles for stars. They are huge, because stars are huge. Over a million earths would fit in one sun. And there are stars so much bigger than that. Red supergiants so large that when they explode the nuclear and gravitational forces are strong enough to collapse the star into a blackhole. Some days I ponder how easy it would be, if a black hole entered our solar system, for it to swallow us. It wouldn't take long. And there would be no way of stopping it. All life on earth, and all its matter, vanished in the blink of an eye. Or maybe longer; my book says time might slow down around black holes, so the closer you get to it, the slower time moves. I think my school might be a small blackhole. Time always seems to stretch in its mildew-stanchd halls. Especially when I dream of myself running underneath the infinite black as the night stretches on.

You can't hear the stars.

There is no sound in space. Because there is nothing in space to carry sound. I think it's strange that one of our most reliable senses would be absolutely useless in the vast majority of the universe. It is why we can't hear our sun burning or the sound of celestial bodies moving. So even though the universe is full of movement and energy, there is not a speck of a whisper to be heard out of Earth's atmosphere.

There are many days I wish I can't hear, even though I know how useful it is. I hate the dread that brews in my stomach when I hear the crunch of truck tires on the gravel outside long after the sun goes down. But if I didn't hear it, I wouldn't know when to collect my book and self-drawn star charts from the kitchen table and scurry back to my room.

But I also wouldn't hear the foul words that shudder through the house. Unlike the kids at school who use curse words like they are cherry bombs to play with out of sight of adult supervision, these words are like missiles: quick, heavy, and full of deadly force aimed to injure. I cover my ears sometimes, but this isn't space. The sound gets through. And sometimes the words echo in my mind long after they have been spoken and a tense quiet has settled on our house.

There is no point in looking at those goddamn stars!

I see my book in flames. The pictures turn black and the pages wrinkle as the heat curls them. My mind envisions the carbon being released from the pages. Carbon that I am made of. Carbon that everyone is made of. A basic element we need to survive. An element forged long ago in the heart of a star. An element that is burning inside our sun even now. Billions and trillions of carbon atoms, moving so fast that the radiation from the reactions is deadly even from the 92.6 million miles earth sits from the sun.

I want to cry. I can't bear to look at the sky. To see the stars that glitter from so far away like diamonds and space dust I will never be able to sift through my fingers. They are all so far away, so big, and so silent. It is a wonder they ever provided me with any comfort at all. Orbits, masses, gravitation, radiation, distance: Words that are so scientific, so cold. How did I ever find any poetry in them? From the smallest meteor to the largest galaxy: everything worth knowing is out of my reach.

I run out the door. Run and run and try not to think about all the wonders that lie in the infinite blue-black sky. I run through trees when I run out of field. And I keep running. I've run farther than I ever have at night. I only stop when the ground does.

I stand at the edge of cliff, the steep slope of the mountain barely visible in the moonlight. I collapse at the edge, hearing the soft rumble of pebbles and dirt skittering down the side from my presence.

I yell. There are no words for the cage around my chest that keeps my star-forged heart and blood from rejoining their brethren in nebulas and star cores. I bellow a primal sound. I am certain if sound could travel in space, my voice would sound like the roar of our sun as it burns. Burns like the pages of my astronomy book. Burns like the end of a cigarette butt peeking out of a dreaded grimace. Burns like hard, cruel words on my impressionable ears. Burns like the outline of a red hand on my face. Burns like the feeling of tears that won't stop running down my face as I cry into the uncaring sky.

The moon is waning, already a crescent of reflected light. The dust of the milky way appears stagnant, as if it has settled on its path across the stars. I recognize the small pinpoint that is the Andromeda galaxy. And I see the twin glows of Alpha Centauri, our closest neighbor. And Venus, a planet almost the exact same size of earth and capable of supporting life adapted to higher temperatures and more hostile conditions. I see all the pages of my book, as distant as I know them to be, so they all look like nearly uniform pinpricks of light. And I smile.

I don't know why I smile. I lay on the dry dirt of the cliff on my back. The night breeze seems to cool the various burnings within me like a white dwarf cooling away. I know Earth's orbit changes the positions of everything up in the sky, but for now they look constant. My only constant. Only the blinking of lights and occasional meteor streaking across the atmosphere gives any indication of movement. They remain silent and out of reach, but for a moment, it feels like the stars are looking at me too. In their wordless way, they blink and I feel them like a call, as my eyes take in their light which has traveled unfathomable distances to reach me.

The wide, infinite sky – silent and vaster than anything I can comprehend – feels like a blanket settling over my chest, even though I know it is just the gravity of Earth's atmosphere on a humid summer night. One day, I will leave the shouting, the crying, and the fear behind. One day, I will go to the infinite black, reply to the stars, far away from the surface of this fragile planet. One day, I will return home.

